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ABSTRACT

Serious crises (death, divorce, hospitalization, moving, and physical, emotional, or sexual abuse) occur to the students a teacher sees daily, and teachers must learn to help students when these problems occur. To determine the extent and effects of such crises on academic work, students (N=300) from grades 2-6, 9-12 and college, who had undergone a crisis during their elementary years, participated in interviews. The results showed that all the students felt the crisis had interfered with their school work. Of the 200 students in grades 9-12 and college, 87 said the impact was short-lived, while 113 felt they never returned to their prior level of performance. Those who reported a short-lived interference indicated they had received help during the crisis through talking with teachers, parents, or friends. Of the children in grades 2-6, who were still dealing with the crisis, most (83) were reluctant to discuss it; the 17 who were handling it well indicated that parents, teachers, and friends discussed the crisis openly with them. All students said that reading was most affected, with a large majority feeling they had not overcome the loss of interest or ability in reading. (WAS)

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Children in Crisis -- The Academic Effect

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Children In Crisis -- The Academic Effect

"It would be nice if some writer would get around to describing me as sexy." (Sports Illustrated, March 6, 1972).

Chris Evert, one of the premier tennis players of all time allegedly made the statement despite the fact that she had been described as "brilliant," "cunning," "aggressive," and "millionaire tennis star," at various times during her career. Certainly, enough plaudits for anyone, we might think, but each individual decides what frustrates and therein can be found the beginning of a crisis.

Quite literally, on a day-to-day basis, minor to significant crises occur to each of us and depending upon the intensity or severity, we react accordingly. Our behavior might be a shrug of the shoulder or we might be worthless the rest of the day or longer. One suspects that Ms. Evert was dealing with a "shrug of the shoulder" crisis since she went out and soundly defeated her next opponent after the interview.

Crises of a potentially more dangerous level occur to students that we come into contact with daily and unless we become aware of them and take steps to alleviate the problem, our survey shows that reading, in particular and academics in general, are affected areas.

The crises we are referring to are not the "shrug of the shoulder" type but a higher, more debilitating kind. We refer

to death, divorce, hospitalization, moving from one place to another, and physical, emotional or sexual abuse.

We interviewed 300 students from grades 2-6, 9-12 and college-age who had undergone a crisis during their elementary years such as described above. Our first question to them established the type of crisis that had happened and all of the above were mentioned minimally five times (abuse of one type or another) to divorce (104 cases). Death was second largest as a "crisis causer."

When asked whether or not the particular crisis affected their academic performance, all responded positively that the crisis did interfere with their school work. Of the 100 in grades 9-12 and 100 college students interviewed, eighty-seven indicated that the crisis impact was short-lived and they returned to their usual academic performance while 113 felt that they never returned to the level of prior productivity and they blamed it on the particular incident that occurred.

When queried further, the 87 who reported a short-lived interference noted that they had been helped through the crisis by talking with teachers, parents or friends. They all indicated that they felt someone cared about the situation besides them, and as a consequence, were able to overcome the particular problem. Of further interest at this particular age level, the 87 who felt they overcame the various crises were more articulate in describing their problem and were more eager to discuss the situation. Those who felt they had never

overcome the problem were hesitant and required more diligence on the part of the writer to elicit the information. As an example of this, the average session with a student who had overcome a crisis averaged about thirty-minutes and those who had not overcome the problem required considerably more interview time (the longest being 10 hours) to get them to discuss the problem.

Fifteen of the 9-12 and college group indicated that a death had occurred in their class while in elementary school and only three felt that their teacher or parent had helped them in the situation. In most cases, the teacher would not allow the class to discuss the situation and nine remarked that the empty chair in the classroom loomed more ominous with each passing day.

Grades 2-6 were still dealing with the crisis that had occurred and most (83) were reluctant to discuss the problem. Of the seventeen who were handling the crisis well, all indicated that teachers, parents and friends discussed it in an open way and helped them think it out. -Additionally, the seventeen felt that an adult or peer was ready to talk with them whenever they had a question or problem that was bothering them.

All of those surveyed indicated that reading was affected most, either short-term or long-term. The vast majority indicated that they were too bothered to read or that it was boring or other sundry reasons. Even the few (7) who indicated that all they did was read during the crisis noted that the reading was escapism and they could not recall one thing read during

the intense part of the crisis.

The essence of the survey indicates that serious crises have a profound effect on learning in general and reading in particular and since an overwhelming majority felt they had not overcome the loss of interest or ability in reading (56% in grades 9-12 and college, even though the crisis had occurred years before and 87% in grades 2-6 who were presently dealing with the crisis), it is suggested that parents and teachers have not dealt as effectively with the problem as necessary. (Cook, Fall, 1982).

It would appear that teachers must become more assertive in dealing with personal problems in their charges (Cook, March, 1982). If a child in the school dies (or a teacher), nothing is gained by ignoring the real fear children feel. We are not suggesting that one become maudlin on the topic but such unspoken questions as "am I next?" or rumors about the cause of death haunt young children and must be dealt with immediately in a rational, yet sensitive way.(Cook, November, 1982) Total class discussion and individual questions answered as often as asked later is a proper way of dealing with the topic.

In a more private sense, if a death of a parent, sibling or other close relative occurs, the teacher needs to be finely tuned-in to radical or less obvious changes in a student's behavior when a death happens. Often, just showing you care and are willing to listen is all that is required and if the syndrome persists, other specialists are involved as needed.

Whereas death was an everyday part of our life in yesteryears, it is not so today. Children of even thirty or forty years ago saw the slaughter of animals for food, the death of grandparents who often lived in the home and certainly were "laid out" in the home. Today, young children are not so exposed. The ones who have "passed on" are now "laid out" in some mortuary and many parents feel the need to "protect" their children from reality. From such irrational logic, crises are precipitated. Teachers may have to fill this void.

Much the same can be said about divorce, moving, hospitalization and other incidents which profoundly affect young children. How often have we heard such horrible crises-laden statements as "he comes from a broken-home." Children hear these statements and they are bewildered. What is a broken-home? Did my house crack open? (Cook and Hoffman Oaks, December, 1979).

Teachers must be prepared for situations such as the above and must ask themselves what steps they would take in the event they become convinced of physical, sexual or emotional abuse of a child. How can I make the impact of moving from one state or school to another easier on my children or what steps should I take to welcome new arrivals to my school? Do local hospitals have educational programs or hospitalization for children (many do and are happy to visit your school)?

Our survey has convinced us that crises can have a permanent effect on young children's academic performance and on reading in particular, and we also believe our role as teacher requires

us to do more than deliver the mechanics of the "Three R's." Our reason for mentioning this is that in a survey of thirty-four teachers in elementary classrooms who had been active in a classroom when various crises occurred, a startling twenty-eight indicated that they had not made extra effort on behalf of the victim even though they noticed behavioral changes. When asked why not, all, in one form or another responded that they were afraid because they did not know what to do.

Teachers appear no better prepared to deal effectively with crises management than most laymen. Since we are an omnipresent force in a child's life, colleges should be preparing teachers to handle crises from small to large, as it is certain that major disruptions will occur. We must be prepared to meet them. A more detailed description of how teachers might react to various crises is available. Send a self-addressed 9x12 envelope with three first-class postage stamps attached to the writer at Department of Education, Lambuth College, Jackson, Tennessee -38301.

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